

# AN AGITATING HOPE

2/1/2015 Sermon on Acts 25, Grace Fellowship Community Church

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I have an agitating hope this morning, brothers and sisters. I have a hope that the bold, long-suffering-yet-cheerful, patient-yet-forward-moving faith of the Apostle Paul can be yours, mine, ours. Not just a faith that we can read about, study, and discuss in our parish groups. I'm talking about a Paul-like faith that we can experience fully, with our five senses, and deep within our souls. Pastor Sharon shared a few weeks back about the question brother Matt asked her while on her sabbatical. He asked, in so many words, "Why don't we see the book of Acts played out in our experience today?" It is a question that has stuck with me. And I want to say this morning, "It can." Today. In this time. In this building. This neighborhood. This city. This world.

But I say this with considerable agitation. To be agitated means to feel disturbed, troubled, nervous, unsettled, upset. But to make a claim this morning that the faith, the drama, the unpredictable Spirit in Acts is ours to experience - feels terribly risky. It is risky because, if I'm to be honest, I know how much I practice unbelief. I can sing songs of praise about our risen Christ, but I live much of my life as if He were still buried. How can I preach of resurrection when I wallow, as I so often do, in self-pity, self-judgment and, consequently, in the judgment of others?

Perhaps I am also agitated after watching the movie, Selma, which I did with my family, and Karen and Anna on MLK day. The movie Selma got under my skin because it was impossible to watch Reverend King and the fight for voting rights without thinking about our Acts study. It was all there. The wrestling with the Spirit, the ambivalence, the counting of cost, the excruciating decisions, the praying with no clear answers, the setbacks, failures, the politics, egos, conspiracies, surveillance, corrupt governors, imprisonment, flogging and beating. And boldly speaking truth to power. It was all there.

I am agitated by my quickness to keep MLK and the Apostle Paul at a distance, or to place them on some otherworldly pedestal. I don't want to know the extent to which I place the Apostle Paul or MLK in the category labeled, "that could never be me" or "that's not who I am" as a way to absolve myself from responsibility. I don't want to face the ways I rationalize away obedience in order to preserve a comfortable life at the expense of a resurrected one.

I know that I am not alone in struggling with disbelief and disobedience. It is why we needed Pastor Sharon to lead us in confession this morning. To receive the forgiveness that Christ's death and resurrection made possible. And to get up and walk...in light of that resurrection. You see, the hope of the resurrection is so central to the Christian life, and yet I find that we so easily stray from it. Our Christian lives become something much less. Showing up for meetings. Reading my bible, maybe. Hanging out with church people. Connecting with each other just enough to feel, or maybe say, that we're a family.

We'll, it may have been the recognition of this tendency - to wander from our resurrection hope - which drove Luke's pen as he wrote the book of Acts. From the first chapter, and throughout the

whole of Acts, Luke writes of the apostles, Paul in particular, giving “testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” Nearly every public address in Acts gives proclamation to the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. It is no wonder, then, that Paul states plainly to the authorities that he is being put on trial “concerning the hope of the resurrection.” For Paul, the resurrection was everything. It was the resurrection that got him up in the morning. And it was the resurrection - yes this agitating hope of the resurrection - that got him into trouble. Think riots. Angry silversmiths. Artemis! Artemis! Artemis! And then trial, after trial, after trial.

But it becomes clear that it was that agitating hope of the resurrection that also got him *through* those troubles, for Paul had met the risen Christ, had been called by name on the road to Damascus, and sent into the world to bear witness. He knew who was in charge. He knew the end of the story. So convinced of this he was that he could, you’ll remember from chapter 21, weep for those who urged him to stay away from Jerusalem and, instead, say to them, “What are you doing, breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus!” Oh how we need to ponder this, brothers and sisters. This passion. This resolve. This confidence in Christ that frees him to partake in extraordinary things. To love. To hold out hope, in extraordinary ways, and in extraordinary circumstances.

This extraordinary passion carried Paul through three missionary journeys, each launched from his home church in Antioch to destinations throughout the Mediterranean, including Cyprus, Asia Minor, and parts of Europe. It was after the third missionary tour that the Spirit leads Paul – yes, sometimes ambivalently – to Jerusalem where things start to get very dicey.

Again, friends advise Paul not to go, but when he insists on going, he is advised to go to the temple with a group of Nazarites (which is a sort of Jewish version of a monk) and partake in their purification rites in order to appear committed to Jewish traditions and quell their suspicions. This plan ends badly. They accuse him of defiling the temple by bringing a Gentile in, a crime punishable by immediate execution according to Jewish law.

When Paul is given opportunity to address them, his words only make them more furious, so much so that the local military tribune, Claudius Lysias, must whisk him away to a safe barrack. He then gathers members of the Jewish council to give Paul an ad-hoc hearing. Once again, worried that they will tear him apart, Lysias must whisk him back to the barracks. At this point, a clandestine team of 40 Jewish covert operatives (I kid you not) conspire to kill him.

Thanks to Paul’s nephew somehow, word of this conspiracy gets to the tribune who in turn transports Paul, heavily guarded, to King Herod’s compound in Caesarea, which is about 2-3 days travel away. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem are so agitated by Paul that they follow behind this caravan a couple days later, sending their biggest guns - High Priest Ananias, and his best lawyer, Tertullus, on a two-three day journey to Caesarea to have Paul prosecuted and terminated once and for all. Which brings us to Governor Felix.

Now one thing to appreciate is that for the Roman Empire, all of this religious drama is, for the most part, just sort of annoying. A political nuisance, because social unrest within one’s domain can

reflect poorly on one's ability to govern. This was the situation for Felix who we see in this story finding ways to stall, bide time, and pass the "Paul problem" onto someone else, which he in fact, eventually does.

But Governor Felix was also the kind of guy that knew how to make the most of things. Roman senator Tacitus tells us that Felix "practiced all sorts of cruelty, using the power of a king with the spirit of a slave." He also knew how to use women for his own pleasure and gain. He married women for their money and power. He did this three times, his most recent wife being Drusilla, a beautiful Jewish woman whom he managed to lure away from her Jewish husband. And marrying a member of the Herodian dynasty helped bolster his influence over the Judean territories.

And so when he met with Paul privately, sometimes with his wife Drusilla, we find out that his primary motivation was the hope that Paul might eventually offer him bribery money. He likely knew that Paul had come from a long distance to deliver alms and therefore had financial connections to draw from. Surely, they might help him pay his way out of jail? This, of course, Paul refuses to do and, as you'll see in chapter 26, that he remains in Roman captivity for a long time, in part because Felix never releases Paul, conveniently passing the buck to the next governor, Festus, to deal with the matter.

Are you getting a sense for the kind of character that Felix is? A womanizer. An opportunist. A user of people. A political climber. A governor who cares only about his reputation, his wealth and comfort, his political ambitions. Can you imagine what it would be like to find your life at the mercy of a man like this? And to while away the hours in jail under his custody, the verdict of his trial left open-ended, as month after month passes with no end in sight?

To appreciate the direness of this situation is to appreciate the depth of faith, the confidence in Christ, the hope of the resurrection deep at work that could keep the apostle Paul going. And under such circumstances, it would seem reasonable for one to merely hole up, hunker down, bear through the long winter, or at best, live for the occasional contact with friends. And we do see God's hand of mercy with Felix granting Paul certain liberties as well as a generous visitation policy.

But we see an even greater grace at work in the form of an ongoing relationship that Paul and Felix develop. To meet and have conversation together appeared to have become a regular habit, although, as I mentioned previously, the governor had some ulterior motives. But Paul, consumed by the hope of the resurrection, used the opportunities to share with Felix about faith in Christ, about justice, self-control, and the coming judgment. It should not be a surprise that conversations about justice and self-control would be quite agitating for Felix, given his morals. This would make Paul's discussion about the coming judgment of all peoples, upon the resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous, particularly frightening. So much so that he said, in so many words, "Please go away for now. We'll connect up some other time." Ahhh, that agitating hope!

I want this picture of Paul and Felix to be a compelling one for us. It is a picture of how the resurrection frees Paul to extend himself to others, even his captors, his enemies. To hold out hope even in what could seem like the most despairing of circumstances.

Furthermore, I would suggest that Felix represents our world: bosses, co-workers, neighbors, relatives, whole systems, held captive by greed, self-preservation, idolatry and fear. So if you find yourself at work, in a system that seems entirely broken, where staff and administration cannot get along, and ideological differences results in division and paralysis – know that you are in good company. Or if you discover that someone at work is conspiring against you – and this can apply to those of you at school, when friends stab you in the back and spread gossip about you through Facebook or Snapchat – then know that you are in good company. Or there are relatives in your family that are accusing you of wrongdoing, and it's almost always about money, know that you are in good company.

Lastly, this story of Paul and Felix offers an intimate picture of how resurrection hope agitates, disturbs, questions where we place our hope. We see what can happen when we speak the truth in love. It often agitates. But we see that it is a gracious agitation, for it's often when one's sense of things is shaken up and exposed as lies, that newness can enter in.

Tina agitates me often. She is quick to point out my selfishness, the ways I avoid having to get into the messes of our kids, their school applications, or what not. The ways that I don't listen. And she regularly holds out vision for a better marriage, for how we can grow together in Christ. And so she agitates. Good wives do that. This must mean I have a *really* good wife!

All this makes me think about our congregation as a whole. Are there ways we can do a better job of agitating each other in resurrection hope? Can we say to each other, as we did during Jubilee a few years ago, that "I want to be a Christian" and that you truly want others to *actually help you* do that? I know that our twin sins of judgmentalism and fear of judgment has made this hard, and I as a leader have been complicit. I know that when there is a spirit of judgmentalism in the air, it is hard to open up and be vulnerable. I want us to know, this morning, that the hope of the resurrection can free us from this. We can confess, and forgive, past sins that we've committed with one another. Otherwise, why would we want to hide the very thing that made the resurrection necessary?

I began this morning by putting out there my belief that the story of Acts can be as real for us today as it was for Paul in the 1st century. That the same God who raised Jesus from the dead, who led, encouraged, and sent Paul, leads, encourages, and sends us today, in this time, in this place. And I want to end this morning by saying it's not just because the bible tells us so. The Holy Spirit is at work among us. He is calling us to go deeper. With Himself. With each other. With His word. To go deeper, and to do it together. To trust less on structures, habits and disciplines, and more on Himself, a path more vulnerable, more risky, and much more dependent on grace. To shed old scripts, to forgive each other for past sins and failures, and to discover and embrace the gifts the Spirit gives to each member of the body.

So brothers and sisters, look around you. Remember, this morning, that we are people of the resurrection. Yes, we are a fellowship of the risen King! Let's not merely know about the resurrection, let's believe in the resurrection, live out of the resurrection, testify to the resurrection.

Let the Holy Spirit have His way with us. And then let's hang on - to Him - and let's see what happens.